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# What I've Learned from Teachers of Writing

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What I've Learned

*Twenty years of teaching writing have brought many changes in our understandings, but some principles still hold true.*

Donald Graves

## Editors' Note

*This article is adapted from the preface of the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*.<sup>\*</sup> We want to thank Don for allowing us to reprint it here to provide a frame for this themed issue on writing workshop in a world of standards. Don looks back at the history of writing workshop in elementary classrooms, considers current trends, and provides a sense of possibility for the future.*

"Children want to write." These words are just as true now as they were 20 years ago when I first wrote them at the beginning of *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983). I would only add, "... if we let them." For the classroom environment has changed. Teachers are expected to teach twice as much curriculum within the same number of hours under the scrutiny of any number of classroom specialists. Time is in short supply—especially for writing. Further, the presidential administration's definition of literacy neglects the powerful connection between writing and reading, focusing exclusively on reading. Still, there is some incredible student work out



there, particularly in the reading and writing classrooms of teachers who are conscious of their own professional development. More children and teachers are publishing now than ever before.

Much has changed in my own thinking since *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* was first published. At the same time, certain basic principles we discovered in our research in Atkinson, New

Hampshire, still hold true. Let me share some of those changes and reiterate some of those principles.

## CHANGES IN MY THINKING

I am still haunted by my response to Professor Margaret Salter's query at the London Institute in 1980. "And what did you find in your research about the relationship between writing and reading?" she asked. "Nothing at all," I replied confidently.

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Questions are usually based on knowledge, and Margaret's was posed in the midst of a career devoted to examining both processes. My answer was at least honest—we hadn't examined children's reading during our three-year study of writing. Although the classrooms in Atkinson included some reading of literature, there was no reliable investigation of children's reading in relation to their writing. Still, sensing the importance of Margaret's question and a real need to examine the relationship, Jane Hansen, a University of New Hampshire reading professor at the time, and I decided to explore children's development as readers and writers. Our eight years of work gave rise to my five books in the Reading/Writing Teacher's Companion series (1987 to 1992) and Jane's *When Writers Read* (1987; second edition 2001).

Every study that I've conducted since our original Atkinson research has confirmed that we underestimate what children can do. The hundreds of teachers publishing books, articles, and especially their students' work have proven that expectations can be raised. As I continued to observe children in the classroom, other teachers and researchers steered my thinking in new directions.

I shall forever be grateful to Lucy Calkins (1986), now affiliated with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, for her very original work on writing in which she developed the concept of mini-lessons. Up until that point, the writing conference was the primary vehicle for writing process instruction, but the strain was too much. There simply wasn't enough time. Her very practical way of teasing out skills through short demonstrations raised the quality of children's writing immeasurably. Other writers and professionals have expanded and refined this format.

I am indebted to the New Hampshire Writing Project, under the direction of Tom Newkirk, for showing me how important it is for teachers themselves to write. Observing the project over the last 22 years, I

grammatical rules, spelling words, and shaping letters. These conventions exist so that readers can understand their own text and communicate with others. Young writers move from egocentric scrib-

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noted the gradual emphasis on teachers' own writing in relation to pedagogy. We simply can't teach writing if we haven't experienced the process as well as the joy of fashioning a text for our peers. Writing with and for their students is one of the best uses of instructional time there is, even when time is in short supply.

Nancie Atwell (1998), founder of the Center for Teaching and Learning in Edgecomb, Maine, and Linda Rief (1992), English teacher in Durham, New Hampshire, have raised our expectations of what middle school students can do. What strikes me about these remarkable women is the importance of their own literacy. They recognize that the teacher makes a far greater difference than any methodology. We've always known that, but we need to be reminded. Strangely, researchers spend endless hours trying to prove one methodology superior to another. Some politicians encourage such research, driven by the misguided hope that if the right method can be employed, then better learning will result. But whenever method supersedes teacher judgment, teachers are relegated to being mere mechanics.

I am grateful to Frank Smith for his insight in *Writing and the Writer* (1982) when he says that every act in writing is a convention: putting spaces between words, writing a text from left to right, following

bles with few conventions to more intricate texts in which they mark off more complex meaning. Smith's simple statement leads us to help children track their first uses of conventions on through their proficient uses of those conventions. Through this record keeping, children grow to understand the purpose and place of conventions.

For nearly 20 years, teachers have struggled with my statement that "children should choose their topics." My logic was simple: "Writers can only write about what they know." But when children make their own choices, they tend to latch on to stale TV plots, violent action scenarios, or insipid sentiments involving Care Bears—the kinds of stories they encounter on television and in computer games. My response didn't help. I simply said, "Take their writing where it is and show them how to make it better." What was missing was a richer menu from which to choose. To that end, I instituted a process known as "reading the world," in which the teacher examines the immediate world surrounding the children where, in fact, dramatic things are always happening. (Paulo Freire first used the term "reading the world," but I am using it in a very different way.) In addition, the world of literature reveals how professional writers select ordinary incidents that parallel the children's own lives.

Most of the writing I encourage in *Writing* is personal narrative. I still believe that for most children, this is the easiest way to begin. The writer has much more control when telling her own stories. Of course, there is more to writing than personal narrative: writing is, after all, a medium for learning to think. A simple statement by Shirley Brice Heath, "The letter is the origin of the essay," gave me a new glimpse into the relationship of these two

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genres. Though letters are more informal, they can contain very powerful personal statements and are usually written for one person. Recognizing that the essay is more inclusive and usually contains more viewpoints than the letter helped me better understand the importance of "point of view" in a student's development as a thinker. At first, children are caught up in their own thinking, finding it difficult to include the thoughts and opinions of others. Gradually, through the process of sharing their writing and showing it to others, they begin to acknowledge other ways of thinking. Understanding point of view is a lifetime journey in both reading and writing. Under the best of circumstances, the learner develops her own point of view in the midst of recognizing other ways of thinking. The essay is unique in developing this kind of thinking.

In the rush to test children on "intake," their sense of self-expression is often lost. I have learned that writing flourishes when children's expression is valued in all its forms. In *Picturing Learning* (1994), Karen Ernst writes about her

work in Westport, Connecticut, and how she discovered that a new depth of thinking arises when writing and artwork are combined. Writing belongs in every subject and every field. To help children move into fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, I wrote the Writing/Reading Teacher's Companion series, and I refined some of this thinking in *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1995).

I am indebted to Tom Romano for imparting a far richer understanding of genre in *Writing with Passion* (1995) and *Blending Genre, Altering Style* (2000). These works and Camille Allen's *The Multigenre Research Paper: Voice, Passion, and Discovery in Grades 4-6* (2001) provide children with many more entry points for written expression. In addition, these books prove that students are highly capable of long thinking, thinking that penetrates a subject and enables them to begin to understand what it means to know in an unusual way (writing as Joan of Arc instead of *about* Joan of Arc, for example).

One of the early problems we faced following the publication of *Writing* was a sudden epidemic of orthodoxies. Artful response, listening, flexibility in decision making, were replaced by attempts to regularize the process. I once overheard one teacher comment to another, "Do you use the five-step or the seven-step Graves?" Writing theory was bypassed for brainstorming on Monday, writing leads on Tuesday, churning out a first draft on Wednesday, revising on Thursday, and publishing the final copy on Friday. Similar orthodoxies included (1) children should write only personal narrative, (2) children should choose all their topics, and (3) spelling, grammar, and punctuation are unimportant. (See "The Enemy Is Orthodoxy" in my book *A Researcher Learns to Write*, 1984.)

These orthodoxies made my colleagues and me reevaluate the term *writing process*, which wrongly suggests that there must be very identifiable steps from first conception to end result. We abandoned the term in favor of, simply, *writing*. Writing, like any form of artistic expression, is a very messy operation. There is indeed a general process from beginning to end, but who can predict the intervals? I find that teachers who write themselves as well as write with their students offer their students greater flexibility and understanding. We quickly learned that some writing ought to be abandoned (with dignity) for a fresh start.

Shortly after *Writing* was published, the "But my children don't want to revise" complaints also began pouring in. *Writing* stresses revision as an important part of a writer's life. I show how even very young children can and do revise. Teachers came to believe yet another orthodoxy, perhaps the biggest one of all: "Children *must* revise." If they aren't revising each piece, then they aren't really becoming writers. I fumbled the issue, trying to show that some writing ought to remain just a first draft and that starting an entirely different piece is the most extensive form revision can take. Not until I was in the middle of the manuscript of *A Fresh Look at Writing* did the problem finally strike me: students hadn't been shown how to reread their work. Until children are able to reread their work critically, revision is anathema. Children need to be shown with real texts how to locate the sentence that best reflects what the piece is about. Subsequent readings show them how to examine their verbs, introduce strong nouns, and delete extraneous sentences. Admittedly, it is hard for any writer to shift to a more distant view and read his or her own words objectively. There are literally dozens of

ways to rediscover a piece that has just been written. Much more work remains to be done in this important area.

important decisions and discoveries is left out. In short, when people are ignored, students' ability to identify with thinking, discriminating char-

**I saw that our high-speed society and hyperactive curriculum was neglecting the much-needed rich study of people.**

One spring in the early '80s, Linda Rief did a short eight-week study of her students' ability to evaluate their own work and the work of other writers. She first established a baseline by asking her students to evaluate the work of students from another school. Then, during the next six weeks, she had her students evaluate their own work, scaling the writing from best to least best and making extensive comments about needed improvements. At the end of six weeks, Linda brought in a new batch of outside papers for the students to evaluate, papers that had also been evaluated by top-notch writing teachers and professional writers. Her students' ability to evaluate had improved remarkably. Most were as good as the teachers of writing, and some of them were able to match the evaluative judgments of the professional writers. More important, these student writers were able to apply their discriminations to their own texts. (It is not coincidental that most of this type of work involves the refinement of very sophisticated reading abilities.) Such teaching is a beacon to all teachers, revealing what young writers are capable of achieving.

For some time I have been bothered by the way students fail to develop character in their own writing and by the way characters are short-changed in the teaching of reading. Too often the focus is on plot, not character. Furthermore, in science, history, and other content subjects, the notion that *people* make these

acters is lost. Professional writers, for the most part, believe that character exists in any genre.

A few years ago, I led a Bible study group in a discussion of the book of Genesis. My background reading carried me into David Rosenberg's (1996) collection of such contemporary writers as Arthur Miller, Michael Dorris, James Carroll, and Edward Hirsh, who have commented on both the writing and characters in Genesis. In particular, James Carroll's discussion of character prompted me to take a new look at curriculum, using people as my principal lens. I saw that our high-speed society and hyperactive curriculum was neglecting the much-needed rich study of people. People, whether in real life or curriculum, take time. A person's wants soon produce both choices and reactions. (Neil Simon [1992] states that plot is the result of people wanting things—badly.) And even though some of these wants are resolved, some element of paradox remains. Carroll's structure became the basis for my book *Bring Life into Learning* (1999).

### WHAT REMAINS THE SAME

The following fundamentals have remained unchanged in the teaching of writing:

1. Children need to choose most of their own topics. But we need to show them all the places writing comes from, that it is often triggered by simple everyday events.

2. Children need regular response to their writing from both the teacher and other readers.
3. Children need to write a minimum of three days out of five. Four or five days are ideal.
4. Children need to publish, whether by sharing, collecting, or posting their work.
5. Children need to hear their teacher talk through what she is doing as she writes on the overhead or the chalkboard. In this way, the children witness their teacher's thinking.
6. Children need to maintain collections of their work to establish a writing history. Collections show that history when they are used as a medium for evaluation.

Very early in our research, I heard Mary Ellen Giacobbe tell a group of teachers: "Focus on the writer and the writing will come." From the outset, the children in Atkinson wrote in abundance because we focused on them, responding to their texts with encouragement. Most of this encouragement was spoken rather than written on their papers. I find that responding orally is still the best way to help; writers need to hear the effect of their texts on others in order to go on.

The "day one" I describe in *Writing* is still how I would begin today. We teachers need to move around, showing children that we are interested in their texts. They still need to *hear* our interest in what is on their pages. Above all, we must take the person seriously and look for good words and phrases well used. When we notice and approve what appears in students' texts, we demonstrate what they need to appreciate in their own writing. I still tell teachers they can never know enough about children if they are going to be able to respond appropriately to their texts. A child needs

to understand that he is an important human being quite apart from what might appear in his writing.

If the child possesses solid information and has a good story to tell, we automatically place the child in a position of power. The child leads, and we follow with questions requiring clarification: "And how did he feel after he scored the winning goal? What happened next?" This does not mean that all topics are student chosen. Teachers can encourage students to seek out useful information through reading and interviewing. But the child is still the teacher. The writer's job, whether that writer is a child or an adult, is to teach and pass along information in such a way that the reader genuinely wants to read what has been written. In the years since *Writing* was first published, I have come up with three statements the student can make to orient the teacher and shorten writing conferences: (1) this is "what my piece is about"; (2) "this is where I am in the draft"; (3) "this is what will happen next, I'm writing next, or I need help with." The student is still the teacher in the process of writing, helping us help her or him.

In the midst of a talk to a large gathering in Maine, cosponsored by Nancie Atwell and her Center for Teaching and Learning and the University of Maine, it suddenly dawned on me what Nancie and other first-rate teachers do:

1. *They are highly literate.* Good teachers are voracious readers who read for personal and professional enjoyment. They write for themselves, for their students, and for broader audiences through publication.
2. *They are intensely interested in their students.* Good teachers take a personal interest in their students' lives, always looking for signs of what

each student wishes to become. They skillfully arrange literacy so that it is the instrument through which students engage in self-exploration. They are fascinated by the stories their children want to tell. Their students know they are valued, independent of their ability.

3. *Their students have a primary place in the classroom.* A student's sense of place within the community contributes to classroom dynamics. Good teachers continually point to student abilities, however varied, to establish student competence within the room. The ultimate goal, of course, is for the students to recognize these abilities as well.
4. *They instill a sense of responsibility in their students.* Good teachers show their students how to accept responsibility for making reading and writing choices, evaluating their work, and reaching other audiences.
5. *They have high expectations.* With experience, good teachers continue to raise the expectations they have of their students. They look for potential, whether in a word, a phrase, or an interest. Students are aware that their talents have been uncovered. When expectations are tangible, it's a matter of living up to one's potential, not just pleasing the teacher.
6. *They teach by showing.* Good teachers conduct their lessons using either their or their students' texts. Students acquire much of their learning by observing as their teacher or their peers share their work in process.

These were the very conditions we set up in Atkinson when we conducted our original research, and they are far more important than any single methodology.

Teachers like Linda Rief (1992) and the entire staff at the Manhattan

New School in New York City (Harwayne, 2001) work on and celebrate similar conditions. These classes and schools have a shared language to talk about books and writing. In fact, the teacher and the principals are instrumental in establishing a highly literate atmosphere. Their own writing and reading set the tone. They live literacy. Children experiment, try new ideas and new genres, knowing that even if they don't succeed immediately, they will always be encouraged to try again. They know their teacher will be able to redirect their experiments, temper the risks they've taken, and eventually lead them to success. The children know they will be honored regardless of their abilities and, in some cases, success. This is love in the tough sense, and it embodies high expectations for independence and effective self-evaluation. The teacher rejoices in student progress so that students, in turn, may welcome the progress of their classmates.

We still need to learn the twin crafts: teaching and writing. It is still a good foundation for thinking about our efforts to help children write. The word *craft* suggests a rough shaping, moving toward greater refinement. But as in any craft, we hone our skills for a lifetime as we offer something to the world that is never quite finished. But there is always the sense of joy at discovering new learning from children, colleagues, and other writers. Let's enjoy the trip.

#### Note

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## Learning with Others: Being a Member of a Research Community

Our Sidebar Team is part of an ongoing research community, the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, where expertise is shared, questions arise from all members, and theory—method relationships are resources used to talk about, examine, and share our worlds with others. Through sharing with others, we also learn about their life-worlds, creating global connections through our local stories and research. We illustrate how the community works by sharing Sabrina Tuyay's journey, framed by the set of questions we use when we enter classrooms as ethnographers:

- **Who can say/do what with whom?** Being a member of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group allowed me to consider new possibilities. I entered this research community in 1992 as an elementary bilingual teacher, not knowing for sure what the word discourse meant or how I would fit. I was, after all, "just" a teacher, not a researcher. What was immediately apparent was that collaboration was the norm—members worked together in various ways. At first, I worked primarily with Carol, a university-based researcher, and Louise, a graduate student, in collecting data in my classroom. Together we made decisions about data collection even though our questions and purposes for analysis were often different. We presented at four national conferences and published two articles. As a result, I began to see myself as a teacher-researcher.
- **In what ways, for what purposes, under what conditions?** My role gradually shifted from teacher to graduate student and now to teacher-researcher in the university's teacher education program. These shifting roles allowed me to collaborate with others in different ways. For example, as a graduate student, I re-entered the ethnographic data previously collected in my bilingual classroom to explore how academic literacies were socially constructed. Although I was interested in academic literacy as a bilingual teacher, I was not fully aware of its significance or the range of opportunities I provided for students to become academically literate and to

learn academic content. In my new role as teacher educator, I was able to use the understandings from my research in designing courses and in researching my own practice in this new context.

- **With what consequences?** While the community's original goals were to develop positive cases of what was possible with linguistically and culturally diverse students, changing conditions led to new goals and directions. Two policy changes shifted these conditions—the passage of Proposition 227 (virtually eliminating bilingual education in California) and the adoption of a highly scripted language arts program in our local school districts. These changes brought an end to the ways in which we had been working with students, leading us to explore the implications of such changes for K–12 students, teachers, teacher education students, and researchers.
- **With what outcomes?** Over the past 14 years, the group continued to expand. Through our work together, there have been countless conference presentations, journal articles, and dissertations. The community also developed the Center for Teaching for Social Justice. Current members are creating and researching new ways for teachers and students to work collaboratively with others, locally and globally, using technological advancements (<http://www.education.ucsb.edu/socialjustice>). Through my affiliation with this group, I have become a teacher-researcher. Our ongoing conversations and collaborations provided me with multiple opportunities for exploring my own questions and those of others, analyzing data from various theoretical orientations and with various analytic tools, learning how to discuss and debate from various positions, challenging my own thinking as well as that of others, presenting/publishing what I have come to understand, and considering new possibilities. I could not have made this journey alone.

—Santa Barbara Discourse Group:  
Sabrina Tuyay and Judith Green

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## Author Biography

**Donald Graves** is retired Professor Emeritus from the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

## NCTE READING INITIATIVE STUDY GROUPS SHARE SUCCESSES & CHALLENGES AT ANNUAL CONVENTION

The NCTE Reading Initiative, a study-group-based professional development program founded on the best of what we know about learning, is successfully increasing the knowledge of teachers *and* the achievement of students. Come to the NCTE Annual Convention in Indianapolis, November 18–23, to hear how this program could enhance your K–12 teachers' classroom practice! Look for the familiar logo in the convention program, or visit our Web site ([www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit](http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit)) for full information. Sessions include:

- The RI Forum, Thursday, November 18, 3:30–4:30 p.m. The get-together is open to all.
- *Literacy as Social Practice* and *New Visions for Linking Literature and Mathematics*
- When Teachers Work Together: Solving the Reading Problem in Middle and High School Classrooms
- Living through the Harlem Renaissance: Creating Curriculum from a Multimodal Perspective
- Creating Curriculum of Significance: Teacher Transformation through the South Carolina Reading Initiative
- Looking Back from the Future: The Significance of Teacher Learning Six Years Later
- Professional Growth: Teachers in Schools Who Are Making a Difference
- Organizing Curriculum to Support Focused and Flexible Inquiry
- Shaping Classroom Curriculum: Children as Significant Partners
- Secondary Literacy Coaching: What, Why, and How?
- Solving the Reading Problem: High School Teachers Explain What Works
- Reading Initiative Fall Institute